Increasing the Effectiveness of School Advisory Councils

Minister's Response to the Report on the School Advisory Councils Consultation

December 2004

A Learning for Life Initiative

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Message from the Minister

Thank you to the many school advisory council members and educational partners who gave of their time and energy to participate in the review of the effectiveness of school advisory councils.

It is clear to me that school advisory councils serve a meaningful purpose in helping to shape our schools and move them in positive directions to better serve our children.

School advisory councils were created in 1996, after much discussion and examination of options, to provide a vehicle for parents and the community to have an effective voice in the education of their children. The improvements I plan to make in response to the consultation do not require major shifts in philosophy or direction; rather, they are modest course corrections and adjustments to ensure that the parental and community involvement envisioned in 1996 can occur in a proactive and constructive way.

I ask that you continue to support the schools in your community by giving of your energy, enthusiasm, and creativity so that we may build a better future together.

Yours truly,

Jamie Muir

Jamie Muir
Minister of Education

Introduction

School advisory councils (SACs) were created in 1996 and their roles and responsibilities were enshrined in legislation. A commitment was made in the Fall of 2002 to undertake a review of the roles and responsibilities of SACs to ensure that they have a meaningful voice in support of quality education in Nova Scotia. The review involved a major consultation across the province through written response to a discussion paper and a series of regional focus groups. The consultation focussed on an examination of three key areas: the roles and responsibilities of SACs, supports available to them, and other issues related to their effectiveness.

Five key areas of concern were identified through the consultation process.

- The roles and responsibilities of the school advisory council need to be clarified in terms of the role of the SAC in school improvement planning and selection of the principal.
- SAC members need professional development and improved orientation support to enable them to effectively carry out their responsibilities.
- SACs need opportunities to network with each other, in particular within families of schools, or with other schools within the school board.
- SAC members would value closer working relationships among other SACs, their school board and with the Department of Education.
- SACs see a need for more parent-school communication to enhance community awareness of the role, value and function of SACs within the school.

The following provides an overview of the directions and adjustments that are planned by the Department of Education in response to these five areas. It is important to highlight that only with the continued dedication and support from school advisory council members, principals, school boards and our education partners can we be successful in carrying out these directions for improvement.

The roles and responsibilities of the school advisory council need to be clarified in terms of the role of the SAC in school improvement planning and selection of the principal.

In response . . .

The department plans to develop an orientation manual through collaboration with the school boards which will serve as a guide to new and current SAC members and to the board SAC co-ordinators in carrying out their duties. It will expand and provide further clarification on the roles set out in the *Education Act*, highlight ways to carry out these roles effectively, and provide information and guidance on best practices in relation to the mandate of the SAC. This direction will help to ensure that parents and the broader community have the necessary tools and information to support the strengthening and improvement of educational outcomes.

Through the orientation manual, findings from the school improvement pilots will be highlighted and the SAC role in school improvement planning will be clarified to ensure that SACs are informed of, and have input into, the development of the school improvement plan and accreditation process. This will include representation on the internal review team, responsibility for completing the pre-accreditation self-assessment review, meeting with the external review team, receiving regular updates on process and results of the school improvement planning, and approving the school improvement plan. SACs could also play a role in some implementation activities, specifically in engaging the parental community in improvement activities, monitoring implementation of the plan and communicating progress toward its achievement. The role of the SAC is not to write the school improvement plan but to support the school and influence the development of the plan throughout the planning process.

The orientation manual will be reviewed with principals in each school board to ensure there is a full understanding of the principals' roles and responsibilities in relation to SAC activities and to promote an effective SAC as an important school asset.

It is also recognized that community seats on the SAC have remained vacant from time to time. The orientation manual will provide suggested approaches for SACs to promote involvement by other community members, organizations, or groups.

Secondly, through the orientation manual and discussions with school board senior staff, the SAC role in the hiring of the principal will be clarified.

As outlined in the legislation, the SAC will participate in the hiring process for the principal. The SAC will submit the name of one representative to participate in the process, either the SAC Chair or a non-staff designate. At a minimum, participation in the process includes having input into the development of selection criteria, having input into the development of interview questions, being involved as a full member on the interview team, and having an equal role in scoring the candidates.

In situations involving a board-initiated transfer of a principal into the school, the SAC will also have input into the selection process by submitting a principal profile for the school. The school board will consult with the SAC prior to transfer completion.

It should be noted that the hiring decision is ultimately the decision of the school board.

SAC members need professional development and improved orientation support to enable them to effectively carry out their responsibilities.

In response . . .

The department will provide additional support through two vehicles. First, the new orientation manual will serve as an ongoing resource to promote role effectiveness by providing an overview of best practices.

In addition, the role of the SAC co-ordinator in each school board will be strengthened to support more effective and timely orientation for new members and to provide ongoing developmental support to current members. Through the provision of regional workshops, the SAC co-ordinator can target professional development to meet the needs of members in particular areas, such as developing communication strategies, how to run a meeting, or how to reach consensus around a sensitive or contentious issue. This approach recognizes that councils may be at differing stages of development, and allows support to be tailored to the unique needs of individual councils.

Further, the SAC co-ordinator serves as the focal point for communication with SACs, school boards, and the Department of Education regarding policies and regulations. By strengthening the role of the co-ordinator, communication of these issues will be streamlined.

SACs need opportunities to network with each other, in particular within families of schools, or with other schools within the school board.

In response . . .

The department will direct school boards to ensure their SAC co-ordinators hold regular meetings among SAC chairs, consider large group sessions with SAC members across the board, and, through consultation with SACs, give consideration to creating a board-wide SAC structure to explore areas of mutual interest, such as opportunities for maximizing community resources, and to discuss successful interventions and best practices. In addition, the SAC co-ordinators will encourage SAC members within families of schools to meet regularly, as well as promoting discussion among clusters of feeder schools to support the transition of students from one level to the next (for example, grade 6 students in an elementary school moving into a junior high school).

Where a home and school association or parent–teacher committee also exists in the school, SACs will be required to designate a seat for a member from this group through its Letter of Agreement to facilitate effective and ongoing communication and interaction to the betterment of the school and the educational experience of its students.

SAC members would value closer working relationships among other SACs, their school board and with the Department of Education.

In response . . .

The department will require each school board to consult with its SACs on board policy development initiatives through the office of the SAC co-ordinator. The role of the SAC in policy development activities will also be elucidated in the new Orientation manual to ensure role clarity and to outline the areas on which SAC members can expect to be consulted.

Further, the department will strive to communicate directly with SACs through the SAC co-ordinators on provincial initiatives, such as curriculum development underway and curriculum implementation expectations. An individual in the department will be identified to provide a contact point for SAC co-ordinators.

SACs see a need for more parent–school communication to enhance community awareness of the role, value, and function of SACs within the school.

In response . . .

The department will conduct research and develop a list of best practices on effective communications strategies that could be employed by SACs to enhance their communication with their school community. These best practices and approaches will be highlighted in the new orientation manual. Creative comm unications approaches could also be shared through workshops or during board-wide SAC meetings, co-ordinated by the school board SAC co-ordinator. The SAC co-ordinator will be encouraged to seek the advice and involvement of communications officials in the school board to provide advice to SACs to support enhanced communications.

Conclusion

While in many areas, SACs are functioning well and have made strides in school improvement planning, others are at earlier stages in their development and require additional time and support. The orientation manual and new support structures outlined above will not only clarify the current roles and responsibilities of SACs but will outline possible new areas where the strengths and successes of the councils can be enhanced and extended. Through these adjustments and additional supports, SACs can improve their effectiveness in creating an environment where parents and communities work together to support and foster student success.